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AUTHOR McKay, Sandra Lee
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ABSTRACT

A study of the influence of the writer's social and cultural background and training on the organization of his or her writing was studied in essays written by two groups of students: Chinese students at the Beijing Institute of International Relations and the Xian Foreign Language Institute and foreign students in the United States. The essays were descriptions of and responses to a situation in which rain began to fall heavily on a long line at a bus stop. It was found that most Chinese students gave the reason for being at the bus stop, described the beginning of the rainfall and the sky, described the crowd, and drew a moral lesson from the crowd's behavior. Metaphorical language was common. Elements in the nonnative U.S. students' writing that were not found in the Chinese students' papers included mention of weather predictions, excuses for taking the bus rather than driving a car, greater variation in the crowd's composition, and concern about time pressures and the opinions of others. These essays suggest that topic development is largely a factor of cultural experience, as well as social and educational policy. Therefore, teachers must be careful that assigned topics do not require students to relate experiences that they do not have, and in reading the compositions, teachers need to determine which aspects of the essay are not in keeping with their own social and cultural experiences and thus contribute to a written discourse accent. (MSE)

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TOPIC DEVELOPMENT AND

WRITTEN DISCOURSE ACCENT

by Sandra Lee McKay

In this article, the author argues that one important factor contributing to a written discourse accent is topic development. To support the argument, the author examines essays written on the same topic by two groups of students, Chinese students in China and foreign students in the United States. The author demonstrates how the two groups of students differ significantly in the manner in which they develop the topic. The paper ends with a discussion of the pedagogical implications of topic development as a factor of cultural experience.

INTRODUCTION

The field of ESL has long recognized the concept of a spoken discourse accent. It seems reasonable that a similar phenomenon occurs on a written discourse level. In the past, most investigations of cultural factors affecting written discourse have focused on the area of rhetorical patterns. Kaplan (1966), for example, in his frequently cited paper, argues that students from specific cultures demonstrate typical patterns of organization. While the manner in which a student organizes a paper may well be influenced by cultural and educational training, an equally important cultural aspect of an essay is what the students says. My purpose in this paper is to share my findings regarding the predictability of what Chinese students write based on their cultural and social experience.

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PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON TOPIC PREDICTABILITY

Two previous studies which have investigated topic development as a factor of discourse accent are those by Scarcella (1983) and Hu, Brown and Brown (1982). Scarcella, in examining the informal spoken converation of bilingual native Spanish speakers and English speakers, found that Spanish speakers in talking with other Spanish speakers discussed topics of far more personal nature than did English speakers. While all of the Spanish conversations included discussions of family relationships, such talk was virtually absent in the English conversations. In other words, cultural background appeared to strongly affect which topics were acceptable for an informal conversation. While Scarcella's work focused on a spoken discourse accent, Hu, Brown and Brown (1982) investigated topic predictability in written discourse. In their study, 39 Chinese students who were majoring in English in China and 62 Australian students at the University of New South Wales were asked to give short written answers in English to several questions. One of the questions was the following.

> Pretend that you have a brother who does not work hard at school. What would you say that might persuade him to work hard?

In responding to this question, both the Chinese and Australian students mentioned the importance of education to the individual. However, while the Chinese students frequently emphasized the importance of education for a nation as a whole, this idea was rarely mentioned by the Australian students. Furthermore, in developing the essay, the Chinese students wrote the response as if they were directly addressing their brother, using imperatives such as, "Try to make sense of your life and study hard at school." The Australian students, on the other hand, treated the brother as a third party and used tentative suggestions such as, "If he works hard, he may one day be as

brainy as his big brother." In short, the Chinese and Australian students approached the topic with a different set of cultural assumptions and role expectations. Hu, Brown and Brown (1982:48) conclude that language use is essentially rooted in the reality of the culture, and they call for "close cooperation between native speaking and Chinese teachers of English to work out an approach which allows students in China to express their own experiences and knowledge in acceptable English."

PRESENT RESEARCH ON TOPIC PREDICTABLITY

My own research supports Hu, Brown and Brown's conclusions that how students address a writing topic is highly influenced by their cultural background. The basis for my study is a group of 113 essays written by students from the Beijing Institute of International Relations and the Xian Foreign Language Institute. The essays were written in response to the following question.

> You were standing in a long queue at a bus stop one evening. First, describe the scene, and then go on to say what happened when it began to rain heavily.

Although the topic was selected by professors at the Institutes, I feel that the open-ended nature of the topic is such that it allows students, if they so desire, to be inventive in their approach to the topic. Any number of scenarios could conceivably take place at the bus stop. However, in initially reading the papers of the students at both Institutes, I was struck by the commonality of the topic development. To begin, most students described the reason for their bus trip. Many students indicated that they were going to visit a relative or friend, often because the individual was sick. Another common reason for the bus trip was to go to or return from work; a

very few students indicated that they were going to a party or a film. The reason that most students cited these purposes is undoubtedly due to the fact that these are the main reasons why Chinese students take the bus. In this case then, the social purposes for bus travel have most likely restricted the topic development.

The next thing that many students wrote about was the beginning of the rainfall. Fifty-five of the students wrote that the rain began suddenly, even though the topic did not state that this was the case. Often the students included a metaphor in their description, such as the following.

> Suddenly, a water spot fell down my hand, then two, then three. It is as big as a soybean.
>
> It was a cloudy day. There were clouds flying in the sky. And suddenly the sky clouded over....Just then there was a rain of bullets.

Perhaps the reason for this common referral to the sudden rainfall is due to actual weather conditions in China where sudden rainstorms may be frequent. The use of metaphorical language, however, is something that occurs throughout the essays.

The next thing that many students did was to describe the sky. The explicit focus on the natural setting may reflect a cultural appreciation of the natural surroundings, but once again there was a frequent use of metaphoric language, such as in the following examples.

> An unseen giant was pulling down the big curtain swiftly from behind the sky.
>
> The sky grew dark. The dark cloud was pushing down. There were no stars and moon, only that street lamp giving a dimlight, just like the eyes of a sleeply man.
>
> Clouds rolled above the roofs and they were seemed as ghosts. I knew it was going to rain.

Next, the students often described the crowd. Fifty-five essays included a specific reference to women with children or old people in the crowd. Many described the crowd as anxious, angry or cursing. The following are some typical descriptions of the crowd.

> There stood a young woman beside me, with a baby in her arms. She looked very worried.
>
> In this queue there were old persons and women who had babies in their arrms. Most of the people were anxious.
>
> Everyone was impatient, particularly those women standing before me with babies in their arms.

Finally, most students ended their paper with a description of the behavior of the crowd. In many cases, someone was in need of help, which other members of the crowd did or did not provide. After relating this incident, many students then drew a moral lesson from it. The following are some typical examples of these incidents and morals.

Almost everybody rushed to the bus. Some people who stood in the front shouted hard: "Don't push! Don't push!" But nobody obey them. I also pushed hard. Because I'm strong, at last I pushed to the bus....I don't think my behavior was good that night. I'm very sorry for that. But, on the other hand, I also think I was right that evening. Because nobody obeyed the public rules at that time. If I had obeyed the rules, I wouldn't have seen my uncle. So I think under the especial circumstance, people needn't do what they should do. Under the especial circumstance, people may behave especially.

As soon as the doors of the bus were opened, many people rushed into the bus....Many many young people rushed in the bus. Just this moment the doors of the bus was shutted and the bus ran away. The other one still stayed here. The rest of the people were almost all children and women....The children were crying....

This thing have passed a few months ago, but I still remember it. I think if there is a special thing, we should have a special treatment. No matter what we do, we all should not be dogmatist. I also think people should not always think something for themselves anywhere. We should pay more attention to the polite. We should care about children, women and old man. We should get the fine habit of thinking about other people.

There were several old persons, they must have been ill because of the heavy rain. I hesitated for a moment, but I didn't move. "Why shall I give up my seat and the others don't do?" Just then, the young people all came out and gave up their seats. They asked the old to stand in their places. After these, they stood in front of the old to prevent the rain.

All the waiting persons were moved by their deeds. The old person's hearts were very warm though they only could say "Thank you. Thanks very much." My face became red and I felt very shy. So I gave up my seat to a pale middle-aged woman.

The thing happened in 1984. Does everyone only take care of himself? Is everyone selfish? The answer is "No." In today's society, people know it's important to warm each other.

Providing a moral lesson to the story may be due to what Yu (1984:34) describes as the government policy in education. He maintains that a basic policy in education

> put forward by the late chairman is "Education must serve proletarian politics," which still remains one of the guiding principles at present....Another belief related to this policy is that people should be educated in the spirit of socialist morality, which is characterized by collectivism in contrast to individualism and selfishness, mutual help in contrast to personal competition, serving the people and others in contrast to putting personal interest above anything else, and so forth.

In order to determine how culture specific the approach to this topic by the Chinese students might be, I gave the same writing topic to a group of non-native writers of various ethnic backgrounds who had been studying in the United States from one to six years. The essays written by these students reflected many themes not present in the papers of the Chinese learners. First, many of the students discussed the rainfall in terms of a weather prediction with statements like the following.

> Somebody in the line said, "Rain, that is impossible. I heard weather report this afternoon. Tonight will be fine."
>
> Rain was predicted for that evening, but I had forgotten my umbrella, so I was anxious to go home.

None of the Chinese students mentioned the idea of a weather prediction in their papers; this most likely is due to their unfamiliarity with such an occurrence.

Many of the foreign students in the United States also provided some excuse for why they took the bus rather than driving with statements, such as the following.

> I didn't drive my car that night because of serious shortage of parking spaces around the school area.
>
> Not all of us have cars because not all of us can afford the expenses of a car....Those people depend on other transportations like bus, metro or BART.
>
> Instead of taking a ride from a friend, I decided to take a bus for a change.

Since for the Chinese students the possiblity of having or using a car is almost nonexistent, there was no reference to cars.

Another difference in the papers written by the two groups of students was in the descriptions of the crowd. The descriptions of the crowd by the foreign students were more varied in terms of the kinds of people in the crowd and what they were doing. The following are some representative examples.

> Some of them were wearing suits and carrying a suitcase. Those are the people that work during the daytime and go to school in the evening. From their facial expressions, they are tired from the long day.
>
> Some people were reading newspaper, books or smoking quietly while some high school students were talking enthusiastically about the last day television program.
>
> The presence of some high school students couldn't go unnoticed. I think they got there a little while before me because they were still jubilating and discussing the victory of their basketball team in the game they just finishing watching. These students made the environment noisy, but lively while on the other hand most of the grown ups looked dull and quiet, except for a few that were conversing near me. I presumed most of them are tired from the days work.

One common theme of the foreign students' essays that did not appear in the Chinese learners' papers was a concern about time pressure, such as those described in the following excerpts.

> I was almost the last person in line and I had an exam at 7:00. I was very nervous that I couldn't make it.
>
> However, it was a Monday and I had to be home by six o'clock to watch the Monday night football game

Another theme that was common in the papers of the foreign students was a concern about the opinions of others. Again, this was non-existent in the papers of the Chinese learners. The following are some representative examples.

> Then I missed the bus and tried to pick up all my groceries. What an embarrassing moment! I did not dare to look at the people waiting at the bus stop since I knew they were laughing at me at that very moment.
>
> I tried to organize my notes, but the wind was very strong, and I was afraid that the wind might blow some of the papers away. I would look ridiculous trying to catch my scattered notes in the street and in the air.

In short, the foreign students' papers contained several topics that were not present in the papers of the Chinese students such as a reference to weather predictions and automobiles, as well as a concern for time pressures and public opinion. Furthermore, there were no instances in the papers of the foreign students of a moral lesson drawn from the incident. The different manner in which the two groups of students addressed the topic have important ramifications for composition classes.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

If, as these essays suggest, topic development is largely a factor of cultural experience, as well as social and educational policy, then we, as composition teachers, need to consider two important factors in the teaching of writing. First, we must be certain that the topics we assign do not require students to relate experiences that they do not have. Several of my foreign students, for example, told me that they found it difficult to write on the topic of the bus stop because they so infrequently travelled on a bus; therefore, they were not certain how to develop the topic. What this suggests is that we need to be careful in selecting topics that are relevant to our students' life

experiences. Certainly, the best writing topics are those about which students feel informed and motivated to write on.

Secondly, in reading the compositions, we need to try to determine which aspects of the essay are not in keeping with our own social and cultural experiences and thus, contribute to a written discourse accent. One way to become sensitive to our expectations as readers is to write on the topic ourselves before we assign it and then use our essays to reflect on our topic expectations. By doing this, we may be able to determine, to some extent, how much of what we perceive as a written discourse accent is due to topic development. Ultimately, no task of the writing teachers is as important as the selection of a writing topic for it is in this context that we and our students can potentially share our cultural experiences.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Sandra Lee McKay teaches graduate ESL methods and material courses and undergraduate composition at San Francisco State University. She has done teacher training in Latin America and in Hong Kong, where she spent last year as a Fulbright scholar. She has published several composition textbooks and reference books, as well as articles on the use of literature in the ESL classroom.